

# Lavant Horticultural Society

## 'Garden Tips from the Head Gardener' *Mark Saunders* October 2023

Mark has been Head Gardener at Fittleworth House for 26 years - this was his 5<sup>th</sup> visit to LHS. This time his talk gave pieces of useful advice covering a wide range of problems in the garden.

### **Secateurs**

His first tip was that it is essential to **ensure that secateurs are really sharp** – they should be able to cut cleanly through the card of a breakfast cereal packet.

If they are not sharp enough they will also crush a stem when they are cutting it, damaging the adjacent cells, leaving those that remain on the plant prey to disease, causing die-back.

For those who might not have a very strong grip for the conventional one, he demonstrated ratchet secateurs, which grasp the item being cut firmly between the individual grasps until the item is cut through.

Anvil secateurs are more difficult to use effectively as both sides of the blade need to be sharpened properly.

He also demonstrated the **Max Tapener**, ideal for quickly and securely fixing the stems of climbing plants to their support.

**Yoga** was his second tip to recommend **to maintain fitness** of the gardeners' body with the passing years.

### **The importance of compost**

Mark could not stress this enough – even a small garden should devote a space for composting.

The great advantage of compost is that it is full of life, including mycorrhizal fungi that helps plants access nutrients in the soil. It can be used to supercharge borders and beds.

He warned against "hot-boxing". The high temperatures of "hot-boxing" will kill off all the life that is so essential in compost. "Hot-boxed" compost should only be used for seed trays and pots, where you actually need an inert growing medium.

**Poor cropping fruit trees** can be given shock treatment by removal of a large branch.

**Weeds.** Mark ran through some candidates for the title of the worst weed:

- Ground elder – in fact, if grown where it can be contained, produces very attractive flowers;
- Bindweed – again, can produce a profusion of flowers;
- Mare's tail – can look good in flower arrangements;
- Creeping thistle – this is the worst weed according to Mark! Impossible to remove all the spreading roots and the smallest part left behind will give rise to new growth. It will take several years to get rid of it and the spines make the work particularly irritating.

### **Organisation is key**

#### **Firstly in the garden shed:**

Mark showed a photo of his, with a massive amount of clean pots, sorted by size and ready to use; all the other essentials in their right place, leaving a clear potting bench.

#### **Then in the garden itself:**

it is essential to create a **planting plan** that can be worked to.

Winter vegetables should be grown all adjacent to each other, so that the rest of vegetable patch can more easily be prepared for the spring.

Group pots together so they shield each other from sun, reducing need for watering.

Avoid leaving bare patches of soil. The more the soil is covered with plants, the less the need for watering.

**Dry garden** – plants with small leaves or silvery foliage that don't lose moisture easily.

### **Winter garden**

*Sarcococca confusa* – should be planted by door, so that fragrance can be appreciated.

*Edgeworthia* – again useful for its fragrant winter flowers.

### **Growing vegetables**

The real reason for growing your own vegetables is the taste.

A wide variety of shapes and colours of tomatoes can be grown – for flavour, Mark mentioned specifically '*Sungold*' and '*Green Zebra*'.

Mark emphasised the advantages of sowing vegetables in modular seed trays. In this way the seed can be started off in optimal conditions, without the risk of the seedlings being eaten by slugs as soon as they appear.

Avoid using trays with very small modules, as the seedlings can then dry out very quickly. Even if they are saved before they die off, this set back can continue to affect them in the later stages of their life and make them more prone to bolting.

The healthy plants can then be planted out with the right spacing at the right time. The best times for planting out are March, April and May, and then September and October.

Mark strongly advocated growing onions from seed, rather than sets.

### **Statement plants:** *(just a few of the plants Mark mentioned)*

- *Ricinus*, the castor oil plant, with the warning that all parts of it are highly poisonous;
- *Euphorbia melifera*;
- *Acers*

### **Hedges**

Mark considers that the best hedging plant is **yew**. It grows relatively quickly and can be easily shaped. Together with **beech**, it is one of the two hedging plants that when cut back severely into the old wood will still produce new growth.

In spite of problems with **box moth**, Mark is persevering with box hedging. He finds that spraying it 4 times a year with '*Xen Tari*' controls the box moth.

### **Annuals**

These can be used very effectively to give colourful displays complementing perennials and shrubs, including filling in whilst these are developing.